

College Guild
PO Box 6448 Brunswick, Maine 04011

Poetry Club

~ The Poems of William Stafford ~

Unit 5 of 8

William Stafford was born in Kansas in 1914. During World War II, he spent four years in a conscientious objector camp. He was a poet laureate and received the National Book Award for a collection of his poetry. He is quoted as saying his aim in writing poetry is to “follow the golden thread, leading to the mysterious center where creatures, humans, and angels live in harmony.” [These poems are from Stafford’s collections, *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep* (1993), and *Passwords* (1991).]

LIFE WORK

*Even now in my hands the feel of the shovel comes back,
the shock of gravel or sand. Sun-scorch on my shoulders
bears down. The boss is walking around barking.
All the cement mixers rattle and jolt.*

*That day the trench we are digging goes deeper
and deeper, over my head; then the earth heaves
in one giant coffin gulp. They keep
digging and pulling and haul me out still breathing.*

*The sky, right there, was a precious cobalt dome
so near it pressed on my face. Beside me my hands
lay twitching and begging at the end of my arms.
Nothing is far anymore, after that trench, the stones...*

*Oh near, and blessing again and again: my breath.
And the sky, and steady against my back, the earth.*

Think how differently the trench digger’s story would read if he were being interviewed for a news article. “A cave-in” can’t match the image of “one giant coffin gulp”!

- 1. Write a poem about a close call. It can be connected to violent weather, violent people, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time like the trench digger in this poem.**

The trench digger becomes intensely aware of the sky and the earth after his near-death experience. Wind is the subject of the following poem, spoken in the voice of a Native American.

WIND WORLD

*One time Wind World
found a way through the mountains
and called on Sky. Their
child was Thirst, who lives
wherever those two go, and brings
them ragged little dolls he
finds in the desert.*

*Wind World likes it near
the ground, and hurries there
even on still days, low.
You can see him shaking hands
with himself in the grass.*

*Wind World always made friends with
us Indians, who wore feathers for him.
Even today when he finds an arrowhead
in the dust or sand
he just leaves it there.*

*Wind World like things that
move, but you notice
he has to pass something still
for him really to sing a song.*

*A Joshua tree near Mohave
told me these things one day
about Wind World.*

2. Who are the “ragged little dolls” that Thirst finds in the desert? Why does Wind World leave the arrowheads he finds?
3. Note that in “Wind World” the stanzas have different numbers of lines. Do you suppose there is a reason for this? Does it add to or detract from the story?

The “stacks” refer to libraries where books are stored and students often study.

AN AFTERNOON IN THE STACKS

*Closing the book, I find I have left my head
inside. It is dark in here, but the chapters open
their beautiful spaces and give a rustling sound,
words adjusting themselves to their meaning.
Long passages open at successive pages. An echo,
continuous from the title onward, hums*

*behind me. From in here the world looms,
a jungle redeemed by these linked sentences
carved out when an author traveled and a reader
kept the way open. When this book ends
I will pull it inside-out like a sock
and throw it back in the library. But the rumor
of it will haunt all that follows in my life.
A candleflame in Tibet leans when I move.*

4. Think of a metaphor for how a book or poem you love has stayed with you forever.
5. Is the last line a metaphor, or does Stafford mean it literally? How can our movements have consequences that travel around the world?
6. Write a poem from the point of view of a book or a library.

In the next two poems, Stafford has fun creating Tillie and Mother – unique characters with distinct personalities!

ME IS TILLIE OLSEN

*I live by the washing machine. My husband comes home
and calls, "You down there, where's my dinner?"
He sends dirty clothes down the chute, and I call, "Send me
your tired, your poor, your heavily grimed." There's the sound
of the shower, then trampling around, then silence. I stand
thinking like a blowtorch burning our rotten
civilization: "You up there, remember
us workers. I want a new bathing suit and a trip
to Hawaii or Europe – somewhere out of this mess."*

*During the first spin cycle he comes down eating
bread and peanut butter. "What hath God wrote
today?" He riffles my manuscripts by the ironing board.
"Scribble, scribble. Let's you and me quit my job
And go off to an island," he says. He makes me dizzy:
"Just what I was thinking." He grabs me and we dance
all through the rinse.*

VACATION TRIP

*The loudest sound in our car
was Mother being glum:*

*Little chiding valves
a surge of detergent oil
all that deep chaos
the relentless accurate fire
the drive shaft wild to arrive*

*And tugging along behind in its great big
Balloon,
that looming piece of her mind:*

"I wish I hadn't come."

7. Write a humorous poem about a family or a family member.

MEDITATION

*Animals full of light
walk through the forest
toward someone aiming a gun
loaded with darkness..*

*That's the world: God
holding still
letting it happen again,
and again and again.*

- 8. Is there a villain in this poem, and if so who? Explain.
- 9. Why is the fourth line so much more powerful than if Stafford had written that the gun was “loaded with bullets”?
- 10. Why do you think “Meditation” is an appropriate title for this poem?

IT'S ALL RIGHT

*Someone you trusted has treated you bad.
Someone has used you to vent their ill temper.
Did you expect anything different?
Your work – better than some others’ – has languished,
neglected. Or a job you tried was too hard,
and you failed. Maybe the weather or bad luck
spoiled what you did. That grudge, held against you
for years after you patched up, has flared,
and you’ve lost a friend for a time. Things
at home aren’t so good; on the job your spirits
have sunk. But just when the worst bears down
you find a pretty bubble in your soup at noon,
and outside at work a bird says, “Hi!”
Slowly the sun creeps along the floor;
it is coming your way. It touches your shoe.*

Stafford picks very small joys at the end to counteract the troubles he lays out. In fact, he ends with the sun just reaching “your shoe”. The mood is a very different that the one “Meditation” leaves us with.

- 11. Compare how you felt after reading this poem to how you felt after reading “Meditation”.
- 12. Why do you think “It’s All Right” ends with such small pleasures? What would you imagine to replace the bubble, bird, and sun to convey the same message of hope for better days to come?
- 13. Write an original poem, one created specifically for this course, on the subject of your choosing.
- 14. What have you learned from these poems or this poet that you might want to apply to your own work?
- 15. Which poem is your favorite and why?

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes